

Thumbnail Image:



Nov 21, 2024 by [Bar Fishman](#), [Ilan Manor](#)

Will Diplomats Join the X-odus? ^[1]

In recent years, the platform formerly known as Twitter, and now rebranded X, has lost millions of users. This process began following X's acquisition by tech mogul Elon Musk in 2022. Musk's contentious policies, which included mass layoffs in X's trust and safety team, his reinstatement of divisive figures such as Donald Trump and Alex Jones, his unwillingness to regulate misinformation and his lax attitude towards hate speech and conspiracy theories all translated into a steady decline in users. As X slowly descended into anarchy and toxicity, and as vitriol and disinformation proliferated on the network, including a staggering 300% surge in hate speech

, more and more users searched for a new digital home while fracturing the digital ecosystem. Some users moved to Threads; others chose Mastodon, while still others moved to more established social media such as Instagram.

Since the recent election of Donald Trump, the number of users leaving X has surged, constituting an X-odus. Musk's increasingly overt political affiliation with Donald Trump, and his use of X to amplify pro-Trump messages and spread falsities about the Democratic candidate, marked the platform's transition into a partisan actor, rather than a neutral space for engagement and dialogue. Crucially, this is no longer an X-odus of individual users. News outlets, journalists, policymakers and politicians have all announced their decision to leave X.

On November 10, 2024, the prestigious newspaper, *The Guardian*, stated that it would no longer post on X, citing the platform's promotion of "far-right conspiracy theories and racism" and accusing Musk of wielding its influence to shape political discourse. Our analysis suggests that *The Guardian* is not alone. Dozens of journalists from *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The Washington Post*, *MSNBC*, *Bloomberg* and *CNN* have all departed X. This constitutes a tectonic shift in the digital space, as X was the *platform de jour* of presidents, prime ministers, diplomats and the newsroom elite. It was a space where presidents declared war or announced breakthroughs in negotiations, a space where foreign ministers commented on world events as they unfolded, and a place where ambassadors and journalists sought to impact public opinion by shaping media narratives of events and actors.

An important question arises: will diplomats follow journalists and join the mass X-odus? Will digital diplomacy units shift their activities to other networks such as Mastodon or Bluesky? Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs), embassies and diplomats across the world now face a difficult dilemma. For over a decade, X has been the cornerstone of digital and public diplomacy activities. MFAs and diplomats relied on X to amass elite followers such as journalists and policymakers, to build networks and interact with their peers, and to legitimize state action through digitalized public diplomacy activities. Studies have consistently shown that X is the most used platform by MFAs and diplomats and their preferred source of information. More importantly, over the past decade, MFAs have invested substantial resources into building a large following on X. Using a vast network of X accounts at the ministry level, embassy level and the level of individual diplomats, MFAs now boast hundreds of thousands of followers on Twitter with some, such as the US Department of State and the UK Foreign Office, reaching millions of followers.

If diplomats leave X, they will abandon the battlefield, allowing nefarious actors to more easily warp public opinion, drive political polarization and reduce public trust in governments. On the other hand, staying on X risks association with its toxicity and with Musk's policies and views.

X has also proven crucial to states' ability to obtain their foreign policy goals. Ukraine's activities on X illustrate this: the country uses X both to garner political support and to crowdfund funding for its war effort

. Abandoning the platform could cripple these efforts, leaving the field open to disinformation campaigns by hostile actors. For states mired in conflicts and wars, X is more than a social media network; it is a vital public diplomacy tool used to secure the support of other governments and publics. X is also central to the public diplomacy activities of states with limited diplomatic representation. Such states use X to assert their relevance in a crowded global stage and shape the agenda of multilateral bodies. Lastly, X remains *the* platform for combating state-sponsored disinformation and debunking lies, or conspiracy theories spread by nefarious actors. If diplomats leave X, they will abandon the battlefield, allowing nefarious actors to more easily warp public opinion, drive political polarization and reduce public trust in governments.

On the other hand, staying on X risks association with its toxicity and with Musk's policies and views. Put differently, diplomats face a reputational dilemma as staying on X may reduce their credibility and harm their image as well as their state's image. These reputational costs will only mount as X becomes the mouthpiece of the next Trump administration used to denounce "globalist" and "dangerous" entities, such as the UN or NATO. Consequently, X will undermine trust in diplomacy and in diplomatic institutions and counter MFAs' basic goals of public communication, rapid crisis management, and the dissemination of strategic narratives.

One might even argue that diplomats are captives of X. The platform's value lies in its unique ability to connect elites – journalists, policymakers, and public figures – in ways that no other network has successfully replicated. This status of captives intensifies in the absence of a clear alternative. The platforms vying to fill its role each carry limitations. Bluesky's appeal lies in its decentralized model, but its audience remains niche. Threads benefits from Meta's vast ecosystem but lacks the immediacy and gravitas of X. Diplomats find themselves at a crossroads, with no single path forward, as scattered publics reduce the efficiency of diplomatic communication at precisely the moment global crises demand coherence and clarity.

Elon Musk's stewardship of X exemplifies the challenges of the *technopolar moment*, as Ian Bremmer extensively defined: platforms like X are no longer neutral tools but sovereign actors, wielding influence often at odds with the interests of states. Musk's erratic policies have transformed X from a trusted partner into a volatile liability. Diplomats must now contend not only with X's toxicity, but also with the unsettling reality that their chosen digital platforms may be working against their interests.
